

The DECODE Communications Strategy

DECODE Internal Reflections,

1st- 5th December 2025

PRIA, New Delhi, India

The communication strategy and future advocacy discussions emerged as one of the most significant moments of the DECODE internal reflection. DECODE has generated substantial knowledge through research, case studies, and sustained engagement with communities. The imperative of this section of the internal reflections was to focus on how that knowledge can meaningfully travel beyond the project to shape public discourse, policy conversations, and practice.

Dr Arjan de Haan, Senior Program Specialist, IDRC opened the conversation by sharing his reflections on the imperative CBPR, as well as the importance of targeted communications with funding organisations.

Arjan’s reflections offered a provocative examination of the current socio-political landscape



Arjan De Haan sharing his reflections about the importance of communication to funders

for CBPR. He began by noting that the prevailing political environment is relatively favourable, creating a timely window of opportunity for meaningful impact. He underscored the growing legitimacy of work beyond the mainstream, observing that non-traditional approaches- particularly CBPR- are increasingly recognised as credible and influential pathways for knowledge production and social change.

He further argued that while support for CBPR has been gradual, it has now reached a critical momentum. CBPR is becoming more firmly embedded within research ecosystems globally, with countries across regions adopting and adapting its principles— signalling a broader institutional and intellectual acceptance.

Arjan also characterised CBPR’s influence on the wider research landscape through the metaphor of “running faster to stand still.” While CBPR continues to expand, the research environment itself is evolving at an accelerated pace, accompanied by increasingly complex social, political, and epistemic challenges. This dynamic context, he noted, demands continual methodological innovation, sustained effort, and adaptability to preserve both relevance and demonstrable impact.

He further offered an important insight on the question of scale. While individual CBPR projects are often deeply impactful, achieving systemic and widespread change requires

identifying ways to expand CBPR's reach without diluting its core principles of community engagement, relationality, and contextual specificity. This, he argued, necessitates a recognition of diverse ways of conducting research- approaches that move beyond rigid, standardized metrics and narrow definitions of impact.

This shift, Arjan noted, also involves entering what he described as “uncharted territory,” where new legal, ethical, and conceptual frameworks are being developed to recognise non-traditional entities and knowledge systems. He emphasised the need to acknowledge fundamental differences in how research is conducted, how knowledge is generated, and how value is assigned. Such recognition, he argued, requires a profound shift in perspective, particularly within dominant Western institutional frameworks.

To illustrate this, Arjan referenced a powerful case study from New Zealand: the granting of legal personhood to the Whanganui River (Te Awa Tupua). Formalised through the Te Awa Tupua (Whanganui River Claims Settlement) Act of 2017, this landmark decision was the outcome of a 140-year struggle by the Whanganui Māori iwi. Central to this achievement is the Māori worldview encapsulated in the maxim “Ko au te Awa, ko te Awa ko au” (“I am the River and the River is me”), which understands the river as an indivisible, living ancestor rather than a resource to be owned or exploited. The recognition of the river as a legal person represents a fundamental departure from conventional Western legal paradigms and affirms Indigenous ontologies within formal governance structures.

Arjan emphasised the importance of learning from how such recognition was achieved in Aotearoa New Zealand and exploring ways to embed similar values within legal and everyday institutional mechanisms globally. This, he argued, is directly linked to recognising the role of land stewards and ensuring that their knowledge systems, worldviews, and relationships with nature are legally and institutionally protected.

Expanding on this, he emphasised that different knowledge systems must be understood as complementary in their shared pursuit of systematising knowledge, particularly with respect to its preservation and protection. Here, he re-emphasised that CBPR offers a critical pathway for integrating local, Indigenous, and traditional knowledge systems without forcing them into conventional or extractive research frameworks. By respecting epistemic plurality, CBPR enables knowledge to be sustained, transmitted, and strengthened on its own terms.

In discussing the relevance of CBPR to international climate change debates, Arjan returned to the idea that the present moment represents a rare convergence of urgency and opportunity. While there is growing openness to collaboration and alternative ways of knowing, the impacts of climate change are already acutely felt on the ground. It is in this context, he argued, that CBPR offers a methodology uniquely suited to addressing climate impacts at the local level, as it is rooted in lived experience, community leadership, and place-based adaptation.

Within this framing, he further expanded on the relationship between climate change and colonisation, arguing that the climate crisis itself is deeply entangled with colonial histories. Contemporary development practices, he noted, continue to reflect colonial patterns of inequality and vulnerability, disproportionately affecting Indigenous communities. Validating

knowledge that has historically been marginalised thus becomes an act of resistance, directly confronting colonial legacies embedded in dominant research and development paradigms.

On a broader scale, this approach challenges Western colonial models of development that conceptualise the Earth primarily as an object of economic exploitation, severing deeper relational connections between humans and nature. Arjan concluded by asserting that the validity and recognition of community knowledge systems are intrinsically linked to processes of decolonisation, underscoring that epistemic justice is foundational to both climate action and social transformation.

Summing up his argument, Arjan asserted that effective communication is the cornerstone- and most critical determinant of any transformational work. He characterised communication not as a peripheral skill but as a fundamental necessity, particularly given the diverse, multi-sectoral range of stakeholders involved in collaborative research processes. Acknowledging that communication dynamics are often subjective and expansive, his reflections sharpened the collective understanding of what constitutes genuine and ethical communication within a CBPR framework.

Central to this, he noted, is the balance between persuasion and listening. Arjan stressed that while communication must be persuasive, it must never become coercive. At its core, meaningful communication begins with attentive listening to the needs, concerns, and aspirations of the communities involved. This practice of deep listening ensures that research remains both relevant and respectful. In his words, without listening, communication cannot truly exist.

He further acknowledged that communication within CBPR is inherently challenging, largely because participants often approach the same issue with fundamentally different assumptions, values, and interpretations. Navigating these divergent perspectives demands patience, reflexivity, and a high degree of communicative skill. Arjan therefore encouraged participants to critically interrogate their own assumptions about communication, asking what, precisely, constitutes “good communication” in such complex, relational settings.

To ground this reflection in practice, he proposed a clear, outcome-oriented measure of success: “The only way we can know if we have communicated well is when we get the desired result.” This framing links the quality of communication directly to tangible outcomes, reinforcing its strategic importance within CBPR.

Beyond the exchange of information, Arjan emphasised that communication is inseparable from the processes through which knowledge is created and shared. He critiqued mainstream research paradigms for privileging limited forms of knowledge validation, often resulting in echo chambers that circulate ideas within narrow academic or institutional circles. Effective communication, he argued, must actively challenge this tendency by recognising and valuing multiple modes of knowledge production and sharing, including Indigenous, experiential, and community-based forms alongside academic research.

Finally, Arjan reflected on the transformative power of storytelling. Storytelling, he noted, has the capacity to translate complex research into accessible, compelling narratives that

resonate across audiences. He strongly advocated for investing in stronger communication capacities through training in storytelling and other communicative techniques. Ultimately, he concluded that telling stories- both personal and research-based- is essential for building empathy, trust, and shared understanding, making it one of the most powerful tools within CBPR.

Building upon Arjan's reflections on the imperative of strategic communication with funders, Dr. Tandon introduced the question Who do we strategically want to communicate the DECODE project's findings to? He emphasized that clearly defining the "who" is critical, as it directly shapes the "how", including the format, channels, tone, and depth of the communication strategy.

Through collective discussion, participants identified a diverse set of key target audiences for the dissemination of DECODE case studies:

- Indigenous people and Community Leaders - to ensure that findings remain relevant, respectful, and actionable within Indigenous and community contexts.
- Researchers - to enable knowledge exchange, critical engagement, validation, replication, and advancement of the academic field.
- Practitioners (e.g., NGOs, community workers) – to support the application of findings in programme design, advocacy, and on-the-ground interventions.
- Policy Fellows and Policymakers – to inform legislative processes, policy formulation, and resource allocation across local, national, and regional levels.
- Research Funders – to demonstrate impact, ensure accountability, and support future investment. This group was further differentiated into Nationally based funders; International funders and Regionally based funders.
- Climate Researchers and Climate Funders – recognized as a critical audience given the project's relevance to climate action and the broader environmental research ecosystem.

Each of these were further scrutinized and the best way to leverage them was discussed in great depth. Participants closely deliberated on the central question of how best to communicate the critical and interrelated insights emerging from the DECODE project.



The discussions underscored the inherent complexity of communicating a project as multilayered and geographically diverse as DECODE.

Participants noted that while a one-size-fits-all approach would be inadequate given the project's varied regional contexts and knowledge systems, there is nonetheless a clear need for a shared, overarching communication framework. Such

a general template, they argued, would provide coherence and consistency across audiences, while still allowing flexibility for adaptation to specific contexts.

Accordingly, the primary objective was to identify and categorise the different audiences the project seeks to engage, and to explore how a common communication architecture could be meaningfully tailored to effectively convey DECODE's findings to each of these groups.

A strong consensus emerged across all groups that the primary audience for communicating DECODE's findings and case studies must be the communities themselves, as well as other Indigenous and historically marginalised communities. Participants emphasised that these knowledge holders should not be treated merely as sources of data, but as the first and most important recipients of the project's outcomes.

It was agreed that DECODE must actively find ethical and accessible ways to share its stories back with participating communities, ensuring that knowledge products are available in forms, languages, and media that are meaningful and usable at the local level. Discussions also highlighted the importance of explicitly recognising the link between knowledge and livelihood, including the material and survival needs of communities- such as access to tools, resources, and infrastructure- that shape their capacity to sustain knowledge practices.

This focus was seen as essential to empowering communities to recognise their own agency. The overarching goal, participants noted, is not only to communicate what was learned, but how it was learned: reinforcing community ownership over knowledge, strengthening confidence in Indigenous ways of knowing, and enabling communities to inspire and learn from one another across contexts.

Dr. David Monk discussed how the DECODE findings can be communicated to Academics and Researchers. As an example, he discussed how partnering with different faculties like Agriculture Environment and Law and Departments and like the Life Long Learning department at Gulu University can be a potential way to communicate DECODE. He also further noted the imperative of engaging with researchers from various universities and research centres (e.g., Prof. Timpko's department, regional training centers) and also

mentioned societies of archaeologists in Africa, and other existing research networks (AIKNS, AIKRN) as examples.

Moving beyond academic engagement, Dr. Jutta Gertrud Anna Gutberlet emphasized the importance of strategic partnerships with policymakers and government institutions to amplify the reach and impact of DECODE. She highlighted the value of engaging with multilateral and policy-oriented bodies such as UNESCO, the African Union, the British Academy, and relevant government ministries. She also pointed to key research and development institutions, including the Scientific Research Council in South Africa, UNDP, the African Climate Foundation, IDRC, and the European Union, as important allies in advancing this work. Dr. Gutberlet further suggested the development of a comprehensive and accessible list of potential funders and institutional partners to support future collaboration and resource mobilization.

Contributing to this discussion, Dr. Mahazan Mutalib underscored the role of civil society organisations in deepening and disseminating the conceptual foundations of DECODE. He specifically referenced Southern Voice, a Global South-based network of think tanks, as a valuable platform for strengthening policy engagement and amplifying alternative knowledge systems.

With respect to tools of communication, participants identified StoryMaps as a vital, dynamic, and effective medium, particularly because they allow complex, place-based knowledge to be communicated through an integrated combination of narrative, visuals, maps, and community voices. StoryMaps were seen as especially well suited to DECODE's work, as they can convey context, lived experience, and relational knowledge in ways that linear text-based formats often cannot, while remaining accessible to diverse audiences, including funders and policymakers.

Dr. Irma Alicia Hinojos Flores and Prof. Jutta Gertrud Anna Gutberlet further discussed how artificial intelligence could be strategically used to synthesize key insights and overarching messages from different StoryMaps into cohesive, funder-oriented narratives, without flattening the specificity of individual case studies.

In addition, websites and social media were widely regarded as essential tools for connectivity, visibility, and sustained engagement. Participants noted that short video clips and concise digital posts are particularly effective in enhancing reach and reinvigorating audience interest. Prof. Gutberlet emphasized that these digital platforms should function in parallel with more formal channels of communication- such as conferences, seminars, presentations, and established professional networks- rather than as replacements for them.

Dr. Tandon and Dr. Mahazan also highlighted the continued importance of traditional academic outputs, including journals and books, especially for university-based researchers and research funders. Building on this, Dr. Mahazan suggested leveraging existing K4C networks by explicitly applying a "DECODE lens" to K4C activities, thereby extending the project's conceptual reach and deepening its impact across aligned knowledge ecosystems.

Lastly, Dr. Hall emphasized the critical importance of contextualizing the DECODE findings. This perspective was echoed by Dr. Tandon and Dr. Karol, who elaborated on the need to be explicitly clear about what is meant by “DECODE” and to adopt communication strategies that are appropriate to different audiences. Dr. Tandon reflected that communication must be deeply rooted in local contexts while simultaneously conveying a sense of the larger, interconnected whole, enabling learning, exchange, and networking across regions. He also underscored the importance of linking Indigenous knowledge systems to tangible livelihood outcomes through cooperatives and collective forms of action.

Building on this, Dr. Karol stressed that messaging should foreground how community learning is situated, interpreted, and applied within the communities’ own cultural and ecological contexts. Finally, Dr. Asyirah Abdul Rahim highlighted that all communication efforts must clearly articulate what the project gives back to the community, ensuring that DECODE is understood not only as a research initiative, but as a reciprocal process grounded in accountability, relevance, and shared benefit.

Strategies for long-term impact and advocacy were discussed as the DECODE reflections drew to a close. Participants emphasized the importance of thinking not only about what DECODE communicates, but how it communicates in order to strengthen the project’s long-term influence. A particularly striking idea emerged from Paloma Aguilar, who reflected on how the DECODE project could evolve into a more sustained organizational form, drawing parallels with the trajectory of PROSUCO in Bolivia. This prompted broader discussion on how DECODE might consolidate its networks and position itself for continued advocacy beyond the lifespan of individual case studies. Dr. David further underscored the importance of nurturing organic, trust-based community relationships while simultaneously engaging with state and quasi-state institutions to ensure structural impact.

Additionally, the participants reaffirmed that communication remains a foundational pillar of DECODE’s work and a key driver of future advocacy. Given the project’s diverse audiences- ranging from local and Indigenous communities to practitioners, academics, policymakers, and funders- communication was understood as necessarily plural, contextualized, and ethical. Varied methodological tools such as StoryMaps, websites, social media platforms, academic publications, and existing networks were identified as complementary pathways through which DECODE’s learning can travel across scales. Crucially, the goal of communication was framed not merely as the dissemination of findings, but as the sharing of processes of learning, knowledge co-creation, and adaptation, ensuring accessibility, cultural sensitivity, and respect for community ownership of knowledge.

Thus, the deliberation concluded with a resounding consensus that developing a communication approach that is deliberate, ethical, and aligned with DECODE’s core values, while remaining accessible to diverse audiences including communities, civil society actors, policymakers, and academic spaces- is necessary. This emerged as the foundational point towards the next phase of the DECODE Knowledge Project.